

Opening Statement
By Chairman Chris Smith
House Subcommittee on Africa,
Global Human Rights and International Operations
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On January 16th, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf was sworn in as the first elected female president in the history of independent Africa. Mrs. Sirleaf had run against Charles Taylor in 1997, but lost, at least partly due to the impression that Taylor would return to war if he failed to win the election. Following the election, Mrs. Sirleaf spent a great deal of time outside Liberia, and many observers felt her gender and her supposed lack of common touch would prevent her from ever being elected president.

In 2005, former international soccer star George Weah captured the imagination of many inside and outside Liberia, who felt that his connection with Liberia's youth made him an almost inevitable winner, despite his lack of education and political experience. However, in the run-off election between the two, Mrs. Sirleaf employed modern campaign techniques, including polling, message development and targeted campaigning to achieve a stunning victory. Her connection with women voters may have made not only the difference in her election, but also may pave the way for other female candidates throughout Africa.

Now that she is leading this West African nation, the question is: what can she do to turn it around from the chaos and poverty into which it had fallen? From its independence in 1847 until 1980, Liberia was ruled by the descendants of former slaves from the United States. They managed to turn this nation into an economic engine, using the country's wealth of natural resources. Abundant sources of water and fertile soil supported rubber, palm oil and tropical fruit plantations, as well as some of the richest

timber supplies in Africa. Liberia's mountains contained some of the highest quality iron ore in the world, and there were significant deposits of diamonds and gold.

Unfortunately, the so-called Americo-Liberians denied the descendants of the indigenous people their benefit from Liberia's natural wealth and their fair share of political power. The 1980 coup by then-Sergeant Samuel Doe led to the ascendancy of indigenous ethnic groups, but it also led to a poisonous political atmosphere and rampant official corruption. In late 1989, Charles Taylor, a former member of the Doe government and an escapee from a prison in America, began an insurgency that eventually toppled the Doe government in 1990. Several years of factional fighting devastated the capital city of Monrovia, as well as much of the country. Following a rather shaky cease-fire, a 1997 election brought Charles Taylor to power. By that time, more than 150,000 of his countrymen had died in the fighting, and more than half the population had been displaced.

The Taylor regime was a disaster for Liberia. Taylor and his government looted the treasury and Liberia's natural resources. Political opponents were jailed, or in the case of Sam Dokie and his family members, they were killed. However, Taylor also was a catastrophe for its West African neighbors. Rebels who had been supported by Taylor have destabilized Sierra Leone, Guinea and Cote d'Ivoire.

Taylor's crimes against his own people stimulated an insurgency that eventually led to his negotiated exile in Nigeria. His crimes against the region led first to United Nations sanctions in 2001 for his support of the Revolutionary United Front rebels in Sierra Leone and subsequently to an indictment for war crimes by the UN-sponsored war crimes tribunal in Sierra Leone in 2003.

The issue of Taylor's extradition to the Sierra Leone Special Court remains high on the agenda of the U.S. government. Nevertheless, there are internal issues facing the new government in Liberia that also are pressing, and that is the main focus of our hearing today.

During the Taylor regime, and apparently also during the transitional government headed by Gyude Bryant, corruption became a way of life in Liberia. Illegal logging and mining and just plain theft of government resources were commonplace. In fact, the transitional government officials reportedly took furniture, computers and even rugs and light fixtures when they left office just a couple of weeks ago. In one of her first acts as president, Mrs. Sirleaf fired the entire staff of the Ministry of Finance for corruption and told the officials to stay in the country pending an audit. The ministry and the Central Bank significantly differ as to the amount of money on hand for government operations.

Those funds are desperately needed to repair Liberia's roads, water systems and power supply – all of which suffered from years of warfare and neglect. The Sirleaf government will have to examine all contracts to determine if they are in the best interest of the nation and rationally exploit Liberia's resources. Too many of the population of three million remain displaced, and 85% of Liberia's people are unemployed and 80% live below the poverty line. About 70% of the population survives on agriculture, which remains disrupted due to the lingering impact of the war.

If Liberia is to recover from its long nightmare, the United States will have to take the lead among the international community to assist in that restoration. That will require focus and consistency in America's engagement, and we are here today to determine if that focus and consistency will be forthcoming.

Liberians feel a kinship to America that Americans do not share with Liberia. Nevertheless, our country's relationship with Liberia is quite real and very important for the welfare of its neighbors. The Bush Administration and Congress must take these facts into account in developing policies and programs to respond to Liberia's new, post-election realities.